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Reagan Threat to Exceed SALT II Curbs Might Cause Soviets to Forgo '86 Summit

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan's threat to exceed the limits of the SALT II arms-control treaty at year's end might cause Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to back out of his commitment to a 1986 summit, a senior administration official said.

U.S. officials said the Soviets are worried about possible embarrassment should the U.S. begin exceeding the treaty's arms limits at just the time the two sides hope to hold a new superpower summit. They suggested such concerns may have prompted Mr. Gorbachev's unexpected proposal over the weekend that U.S. and Soviet officials meet this month to discuss the Reagan administration's policy on SALT II.

The meeting would be a special session of the Standing Consultative Commission, a body of American and Soviet government experts assigned to deal with adherence to arms control.

Chilly Reaction

U.S. officials said they hadn't decided how to respond, but their initial reaction was chilly. President Reagan, on boarding Air Force One in California to return to Washington from vacation, said, "Too much SALT isn't good for you."

And White House spokesman Larry Speakes said that although the administration hadn't decided what to do, "it's not unprecedented to decline." In 1983, Moscow declined to attend a meeting requested by the U.S. to discuss alleged Soviet violations.

Some U.S. officials are worried that a Reagan-Gorbachev summit could be postponed if the U.S. continues to turn a cold shoulder to Moscow. "Gorbachev couldn't politically afford to come here immediately after, or before, the U.S. exceeded the SALT II numerical limits," said a senior administration analyst.

Polarization Cited

But, this official said, the administration is polarized over how to respond to the Soviet leader's latest arms proposals and his invitation to the July meeting.

Attending a summit at a time the U.S. might be breaching SALT II arms limits would be "political suicide" for Mr. Gorbachev, according to the administration analyst. The Soviet leader "must see progress early enough in advance so he can ensure when he gets here he won't be abused," he added. "Whether or not the summit process survives is on the table."

Administration officials suggested Mr. Gorbachev wants to force Mr. Reagan either to commit to an arms-control process that would constrain the development of space defense weapons or to agree he won't exceed the SALT II arms limits any time near the expected date for a second summit. If the U.S. isn't forthcoming, one official says it would be politically easier for Mr. Gorbachev to postpone a summit beyond the end of the year.

Staying Within Limits

The administration plans in December to equip its 131st B-52 to carry cruise missiles, a move that would put the U.S. over the SALT II limits unless it takes a Poseidon submarine out of commission. U.S. officials said the administration easily could stay within the limits of the unratified arms treaty simply by postponing deployment of the cruise-missile B-52s until the expected decommissioning of aging Poseidons early next year.

Arnold Horelick, a Rand Corp. official and senior Soviet analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency, said the U.S. still could make coming to a summit more palatable for Mr. Gorbachev despite President Reagan's decision to abandon the SALT II treaty.

"I think he (Gorbachev) wants at the very least to be assured, whether the U.S. calls it compliance or not, that President Reagan does not exceed the limits precisely at a time when they get together," Mr. Horelick said. This analyst argued the U.S. also could ease Mr. Gorbachev's fears by showing willingness to accept some constraints on the "Star Wars" anti-missile defense research program in exchange for deep cuts in Soviet offensive weapons.

Western diplomats in Moscow said Mr. Gorbachev was criticized in his country's military circles for having come away with too little from his last superpower summit, and for essentially accepting Mr. Reagan's agenda. These observers suggested Mr. Gorbachev managed to weather such criticism because Soviet officials were pleased, after years of ailing leadership, just to see their leader meet as an equal on the international stage with the U.S. president. But they warned that Mr. Gorbachev wouldn't be able to accept so little at his second summit.

President Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev agreed at their last summit meeting to meet in Washington in 1986 and then in Moscow the following year.